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ABSTRACT

An instructor of a basic communication course began a section designed for students with high levels of communication apprehension. To the basic format of the course, the instructor added sections on the nature of communication apprehension, goal setting, relaxation, visualization, and performance activities that gradually increased in complexity and audience size. None of the 19 students who self-selected themselves for the special section of the introductory course had any physical attributes that made them appear anything but a typical student. Many students enrolled in the course more to fulfill a graduate requirement. The existence of the special section encouraged students and prevented them from using typical avoidance behaviors. Students were willing to help each other in and out of class. A series of ungraded, easy speaking assignments were used early in the semester. One major problem was grading. The special communication apprehension section of the class satisfied the basic course requirement, so it seemed students in the special section should be evaluated by the same standards as those in regular classes, but students' speeches were of lower quality than those in a regular class. Yet for the communication apprehensive students, their speeches were major improvements over their earlier work. Another problem was that the instructor spent so much time easing students into their first assignments that the class had trouble getting to the rest of the assignments. Overall, students seemed to be helped by the course. Of 64 communication areas surveyed by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24, students showed improvement in all but 6 areas. (The course syllabus and a 38-item communication apprehension bibliography are attached.) (RS)

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# STARTING A BASIC COURSE SECTION FOR COMMUNICATION APPREHENSIVE STUDENTS

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As basic course directors and instructors, the problem of communication apprehension is of concern to us. For a number of years, we have devoted a large amount of energy to investigating, discussing, and attempting to mitigate the condition (See, for example, Adler; Cohen; Klopf; McCroskey, 1980; Page; Pelias; Watson.) On a personal level, we have probably all experienced it and can empathize with the feelings our students have in approaching performance situations. We also know that high levels of communication handicap students in terms of self esteem, social relationships, professional achievement, and academic achievement (See, for example, Richmond; Chesebro, et. al.;, Daly and Stafford; Daly et. al. 1989; Duran and Kelly).

For these reasons, in the fall of 1992, I began a section of our basic course designed for students with high levels of communication apprehension. Given that we have 4,500 students taking our course annually, I felt we had to have a significant number of communication apprehensives in the course. This paper describes something of the nature of the course and what I discovered in creating and teaching it. The report of my experiences I hope will be useful to others approaching a similar situation.

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## THE NATURE OF THE CLASS

Our basic course is a hybrid course with units on communication theory, interpersonal communication, small groups, and public speaking. To adapt the course, I set it up along the lines described by Kelly (1989) in her description of the Penn State rheteritherapy program though with additions from other courses and programs. To the basic format of the course, I added sections on the nature of communication apprehension, goal setting, relaxation, visualization, and performance activities that gradually increased in complexity and audience size. (See attached syllabus)

Interested students were located via an announcement about the class read in all sections of the basic course on the first day of classes. Those self-selecting themselves for the screening process took the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 and had a brief interview with the instructor. Twenty-one went through the screening process; nineteen enrolled for the class; seventeen finished the course.

One problem that arose in the screening process was separating those who were naturally apprehensive and those who were apprehensive because of language problems. Several international students were interested in the class, but their anxieties, we discovered, did not stem so much from anxieties about performing as much has they did from having to communicate in a second language. As the primary goal of

the class was dealing with apprehension rather than problems arising from the use of a second language, these students were left in the regular sections. The class still enrolled four students for whom English was a second language.

GOODBYE STEREOTYPES

One of the interesting, and educational, aspects of the class was the number of people in the class who, at first glance, would not appear to be candidates for such a class. None had any physical attributes that made them appear anything but a typical student. Several were the "quiet, retiring" type, but the class also included an ex-Marine, a physically large young man who loved riding motorcycles, a high school all-star football player, and a cute young woman whose appearance would seem to make her the center of social attention.

THE TRIPLE HURDLE

Basic course instructors must often overcome student prejudices toward the course. One of the most common is that many students enroll in the course more to fulfill a graduation requirement than from any desire to learn about communication.

The instructor in a special communication apprehension section of the basic course faces that problem as well plus two more. The first is that communication apprehensive students are not simply averse to taking a course in communication, they are averse to communication as an activity. The aversion to communication creates a third

difficulty if the students give way to their avoidance instincts: instead of taking the course their first or second semesters of school, they take it much further along, some in their last semester. They may then have some feelings that besides being distasteful, the course is an affront to their dignity as proud seniors.

Any one of the prejudices may hamper the student's progress. The three together may make progress in the class difficult for the student and frustrating for the instructor.

## WHAT WORKED

Using an appropriate approach can help to overcome some of the barriers. The existence of the class itself is an encouraging factor. One student commented, for example, that, "it is a relieving feeling when you know there are people like you who have trouble in public speaking and that there's a class just for you." With the basic course program showing interest in communication apprehensives, the communication apprehensives reciprocated with interest in the course.

The class further encouraged interaction because the students could no longer use a standard excuse for not performing: "I'm the only one who has a problem with communicating. I will be quiet so that nobody will know." In the special section, everyone had a problem with communication apprehension, and all were aware of the fact.

The reasoning can then become, "If that person can give a speech, I can too."

Since they were in a class with their peers and since nobody had any secret to hide about communication apprehension, students were more willing to help each other. Some went so far as to meet together outside of class to rehearse their speeches with each other.

In addition to the support students receive from each other, the instructor can also aid by interacting with the students. I made it a point to be in the classroom as early as possible and to talk with the students as much as possible. Talking with them demonstrated the instructor's interest in them. One of the units in the course is conversation, and the instructor can model conversation practice while providing the students with yet another opportunity to communicate.

As with the Penn State model, goal setting formed an important part of the class. Communication apprehensives often form unrealistic goals for their interactions. Learning how to set appropriate goals provided a more realistic picture of interaction. Having to analyze, plan, engage in, and evaluate three communication interactions provided students with practice. Almost all of the assigned interactions turned out well, and the experiences were encouraging.

The in-class speaking assignments were graduated in difficulty and in audience size. I used a number of

ungraded, easy speaking assignments throughout the early part of the class. Typical would be "My Favorite Outfit" speech (Rollman.) where the students wore their favorite clothes and told what they were, how they got them, why they liked them, and what they thought they communicated nonverbally. The first assignment was given to only one person at a time, the second to two people at a time, and so on until the audience was half the class. By the time they gave their first graded speeches, they had already given five non-graded presentations.

The use of in-class groups was useful. I used small groups for oral quizzes and exercises in class. The small groups not only reinforced the ideas of the class but also forced interaction. To remain silent was worse than attempting the assignment. People who would ordinarily stay at the edges of a group became functioning members. The work together also encouraged friendly relations between class members.

## WHAT WAS LESS SUCCESSFUL

While the class was generally successful, I discovered several problems which will need to be addressed as the class evolves. One of the major problems was grading. The special communication apprehension section of the class satisfied the basic course requirement. Hence, it seemed to me, students in the special section should be evaluated by the same standards as those in regular classes. Otherwise, we were imposing a double standard.

As might be expected, the speeches were of lower quality than those in a regular class. Yet for the communication apprehensive students, their speeches were major improvements over their earlier work. For some, simply giving the speech was an accomplishment. Their evaluation comments showed that several were discouraged by the grades they received.

The problem might have been at least lessened if I had spent more time explaining the grading criteria and their application. In addition, an instructor might give two grades, one for improvement and another for accomplishment. A third method would be simply to overlook any ideas of equivalency between regular sections and the communication apprehension section. One would then create a system of grading relative to the special section and use it for that class while regular sections used a different system and standards.

The grading points to another larger problem, one of sympathy and compensation. As an instructor you realize that students in the special section have greater difficulties in communicating than students in regular sections. Knowing they are having a hard time, the temptation is to be less demanding. You try to lessen the pressure they feel by taking more time with assignments, providing more rehearsal opportunities, or being lenient when they, for example, read a speech rather than speak it.

One goal throughout the class was to ease students into communication situations in which they could succeed, then increase the difficulty of the assignments. I spent, though, too much time "easing" them into goal setting at the first of the course so that we had trouble getting in the rest of the assignments. My diary for the course notes on "Day Seven" that "the schedule is bogging down." I ended up leaving out the formal small group presentation because we did not have enough time for it. The small group work had to consist of reading the relevant material in the text and small assignments in class.

## OVERALL EVALUATION

Studies of the Penn State approach to communication apprehension or reticence have indicated the success of that approach (Kelly, 1990; 1992). My simpler measures indicated that our special section was also successful, even given the problems of working through a course for the first time. One very simple measure indicated success. The students completed both the in-class and out-of-class assignments.

On a more sophisticated level of measurement the posttest of the PRCA-24 showed widespread improvement. Of the sixty-four communication areas surveyed, only six showed no improvement. In addition, I asked students to write one thing they liked about the class and one thing they would change about the class. Their comments ranged from dutiful acquiescence to pleased accomplishment. One noted, "I don't like giving speeches, so nothing in this class really

appealed to me. It was just something that I had to do" while other reactions were, "This class was very helpful in relaxing me before giving speeches" and ". . . this class helped me a lot and I enjoyed myself."

Further evaluation would be useful. I would very much like to know how students feel about the course sometime afterwards, say a year. Perhaps the "I got through it" students may discover that "getting through" taught them things they continue to use profitably. Perhaps the "it helped me a lot" reactions were as much responses to the supportive atmosphere as they were signs of any real progress.

## CONCLUSION

The class was a valuable experience both to the students and to me. I think they profited from it, and I discovered some new approaches to teaching. Whatever worked with the communication apprehension section should also work with the regular sections of the course. The class will be offered again this fall. I will try to take my own advice in approaching the second experience.

COM. 114-S
Semester Schedule

| | |
|---|---|
| Day 1 | Introduction to the class: philosophy, assignments, expectations, performances, text, absence policy, grading scale, etc. |
| Day 2 | Creating and accomplishing communication goals (Chaps. 1, 2) |
| Day 3 | Performance: one to one |
| Day 4 | "You as a Communicator" (Chap. 3) |
| Day 5 | Performance: culture analysis, one to two |
| Day 6 | The tools of communication: voice and body (Chap 10, pp. 207-213) |
| Day 7 | Performance: one to three |
| Day 8 | Interpersonal communication (Chap. 4) |
| Day 9 | Interpersonal communication |
| Day 10 | Performance: one to four |
| Day 11 | Small group communication (Chap. 5) |
| Day 12 | Small group communication (Chap. 6) |
| Day 13 | Small group workshop |
| Day 14 | Small group workshop |
| Day 15 | Performance: group 1 |
| Day 16 | Performance: group 2 |
| Day 17 | Performance: group 3 |
| Day 18 | Performance: group 4 |
| Day 19 | Public speaking (Chap. 7) |
| Day 20 | Public speaking (Chap. 8) |
| Day 21 | Public speaking (Chap. 9) |
| Day 22 | Public speaking (Chap. 10) |
| Day 23 | Visualization and relaxation |

| | |
|---|---|
| Day 24 | Performance: speech 1 |
| Day 25 | Performance: speech 1 |
| Day 26 | Performance: speech 1 |
| Day 27 | Performance: speech 1 |
| Day 28 | Delivery |
| Day 29 | Performance review day |
| Day 30 | Performance: speech 2 |
| Day 31 | Performance: speech 2 |
| Day 32 | Performance: speech 2 |
| Day 33 | Performance: speech 2 |
| Day 34 | Persuasion (Chap. 11) |
| Day 35 | Persuasion (Chap. 12) |
| Day 36 | Persuasion exercises |
| Day 37 | Performance: persuasive speech |
| Day 38 | Performance: persuasive speech |
| Day 39 | Performance: persuasive speech |
| Day 40 | Performance: persuasive speech |
| Day 41 | Performance: persuasive speech |
| Day 42 | Exam review day |
| Day 43 | Exam during exam week |

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION
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